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College search...



How Does A College Get Its Reputation?

Some colleges are known for academic excellence, famous professors and brilliant students. But are these schools strong in all areas? We investigate what's in a college's reputation.



Photo: Thinkstock

We all understand that colleges like **Harvard**

[\(/colleges/CEEFF2A5/Massachusetts/Cambridge/Harvard-University/\)](#), **Princeton**

[\(/colleges/39A71835/New-Jersey/Princeton/Princeton-University/\)](#) and **Stanford**

[\(/colleges/A3D77BC9/California/Stanford/Stanford-University/\)](#) have excellent reputations, and these reputations can allow alumni some distinct advantages after graduation.

But are these elite colleges really "better" than a small liberal arts school, or a larger state school? Great educations are available at a wide range of schools, and college reputation can sometimes be misleading.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when discussing college reputation is that different schools have different strengths.

Acceptance Rates

An important part of a college reputation is student ability. Typically, schools that have great reputations field a great deal of applicants. In turn, these schools can pick and choose exactly who they want to come to their institutions. And since they can select the very best of students,

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their reputations stay intact. It's an ongoing cycle.

And find out everything you need to know about planning for college.

Think of it like this:

Step 1 - A school has a strong reputation

Step 2 - The school attracts numerous, highly qualified applicants

Step 3 - The school can be extremely selective

Step 4 - The school's alumni achieve a high level of success and visibility

And that takes us back to step 1...

In the top 10 most selective colleges we find the likes of Harvard, Yale, Stanford, [**Columbia**](#) ([/colleges/F67C6328/New-York/New-York/Columbia-University-in-the-City-of-New-York/](#)), [**Princeton**](#) ([/colleges/39A71835/New-Jersey/Princeton/Princeton-University/](#)) and [**MIT**](#) ([/colleges/9E7A13EC/Massachusetts/Cambridge/Massachusetts-Institute-of-Technology/](#))

- all of which generally accept somewhere between six and 10 percent of their applicants.

Obviously these are great schools. But how did these schools get their reputations in the first place?

History

It stands to reason that the schools that have been around the longest are the most well-known. This certainly lends itself to obtaining a good reputation. Additionally, schools with long histories develop door-opening networks of alumni. Some would call these "Old-boy networks." But some [**research**](#) (http://www.usatoday.com/money/2005-06-06-harvard-usat_x.htm) has shown that in today's economic environment, these types of networks are not as strong as they once were. Small liberal arts schools and some large public institutions have great alumni networks as well, and are just as beneficial to career advancement post-graduation as the schools with longer histories in education.

Prestigious Professors

Famous professors lend a certain air of prestige to many high-quality institutions. For example, in recent years, Princeton University has had some of the biggest names in academia teaching on its campus - professors like Cornel West, Paul Krugman, and Toni Morrison - giving the Ivy League school a leg up when it comes to professor reputation.

But do famous professors only teach at elite schools? And more importantly, do famous professors always equal good education?

Famous professors teach at all different types of schools. For example, Madeline Albright, the first woman to become United States Secretary of State, teaches at [**Georgetown University**](#) ([/colleges/C5CE7915/District-Of-Columbia/Washington/Georgetown-University/](#)). Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts and the Democratic presidential nominee in 1988, taught at [**UCLA**](#) ([/colleges/534BED4C/California/Los-Angeles/University-of-California-Los-Angeles/](#)) and [**Northeastern University**](#) ([/colleges/9E8A6744/Massachusetts/Boston/Northeastern-University/](#)). And poet and author Maya Angelou teaches courses at [**Wake Forest**](#) ([/colleges/BB7FDF77/North-Carolina/Winston-Salem/Wake-Forest-University/](#)). Famous visiting professors are even more common. For example, Al Gore was a visiting professor at Columbia University.

The question of whether big-name professors really add to a student's education speaks to a larger question about research professors versus teaching professors. In general terms, professors at teaching institutions focus more on teaching students, and professors at research institutions focus more on research. That being said, it's difficult to say that research professors aren't good teachers, and vice versa. The point is: it's difficult to generalize a good education simply based on faculty.

Departmentalized

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when discussing college reputation is that different schools have different strengths. Depending on your preferred field of study, different schools could be right (or wrong) for you.

For example, MIT may have strong science programs, but choosing a school like [NYU \(/colleges/014142A9/New-York/New-York/New-York-University/\)](#), if you're interested in journalism, may provide a stronger education in writing than MIT could offer.

The [University of Illinois \(/colleges/B68AF709/Illinois/Chicago/University-of-Illinois-Chicago/\)](#) has a great engineering program (famous alumni include the inventor of the handheld calculator and the co-authors of the world's first Web browser), but it may be best to choose UCLA, if you're interested in psychology.

You can get a great international relations or political science education at many schools, but you would be hard-pressed to find the breadth of opportunities available in that field at schools based in Washington D.C. such as [American University \(/colleges/A6C80D13/District-Of-Columbia/Washington/American-University/\)](#) and Georgetown University.

Generally, elite colleges and top-notch institutions will have strengths in a wide variety of fields. But it is important to remember that they are not the only colleges that can provide quality educations. Doing your research about a school's reputation can provide some interesting insights and help you reach your academic goals at whatever institution you choose.

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